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ABSTRACT

Based on the view that parents' role in their young children's learning must be viewed within the context of families' changing needs and the communities in which they live, this guide explores how staff in early years settings can further develop communication and contact with parents. The guide is designed for promoting greater understanding of the Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5 in Scotland and encourages staff to explore how they can use this curriculum to examine existing strategies for working with parents, establish priorities, identify gaps, and locate areas for development. Section 1 of the guide discusses how preschools need to encompass a wide diversity of parenting cultures and stages of family life. Section 2 concerns the curriculum and how it relates to parents' expectations for their children. Section 3 suggests ways early years programs can share information to aid in induction and transition, to develop confidence in one another, to develop feelings of belonging, and to provide a starting point for planning and providing learning experiences. Section 4 suggests ways that communication and contact with parents can meet changing interests and needs, can ensure regular contact and continued sharing of information, and can encourage deeper and more meaningful discussion about early development and learning. Section 5 provides suggestions for encouraging parental involvement in the classroom, on field trips, or during play activities; and working together to establish a framework for sharing children's achievements. Section 6 focuses on how preschool staff can work with parents to facilitate the transition from preschool to school. Section 7 presents staff development activities related to the issues discussed in previous chapters. Contains 12 references. (KB)

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EARLY EDUCATION SUPPORT

Working with Parents: A Shared Understanding of the Curriculum 3–5

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Working with Parents: A Shared Understanding of the Curriculum 3–5

Dorothy Caddell

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Cuikenburn Nursery School
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Moredun Primary School Nursery Class
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Craigentinny Primary School Nursery Class

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FOREWORD

This book has been written to encourage staff in early years settings to explore how they can, within their own specific setting, develop relationships with parents that could contribute towards a shared understanding of the Curriculum Framework 3 to 5 document.

Working with parents is not a new concept for staff in pre-school settings.

- One of the main principles on which early education is based is the recognition that young children's first and most important learning experiences happen in and around the home and family.
- 'Partnership with parents' is a phrase commonly used in nursery/pre-school centre policies and handbooks.
- Many early years settings have already developed a range of ways of communicating with parents to share information and offer guidance about how they can be more actively involved with their child in the nursery/centre.

Why then is this book necessary?

Although most pre-school settings have a policy stating that they involve the parents in the life and work of the nursery/centre, the term 'parental involvement' covers a wide range of home-school initiatives. This book specifically focuses on working together with parents towards a shared understanding of the early years curriculum for children aged 3–5. In bringing together the two concepts of 'parental involvement' and 'curriculum' it highlights that, although we may already be developing links between home and our pre-school centre, it is easy for us, when encouraging parental involvement, to underestimate the full potential of the parents' role in their child's learning experiences.

> *Parents are children's prime educators in their earliest years and they continue to play a major role in their young children's learning when they enter the early years setting. Staff should value the role of parents in their children's learning and work to create a genuine partnership with them.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

Parents are:

- a key source of information
  - They are in a good position to give us a clear idea of the learning experiences that their children gain before coming to a pre-school setting. They know at first hand what 'real-life' situations are for their child
- an important educational resource
  - They have a unique relationship with their children and a deep knowledge of their own child's abilities.

Staff in early years settings have a good understanding of how children learn. When children come to pre-school, we readily share information with parents about children's development and learning, but we need to recognise the unique relationship that

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parents have with their child. Parents are able to see what their child can do in a variety of different contexts. They see how certain conditions influence and can change their child's confidence and motivation. We need to listen to parents and value their opinions and experiences.

Both parents and early educators have knowledge and experience of what the young child can do.

The practical challenge is to make connections between what children know, what we know about how children learn and the intimate knowledge that parents have about their children.

How can we begin to meet this challenge?

The *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* offers a 'valuable framework to shine searchlights into what we do'. It can help us make clearer connections between what we know about how children learn, our role in providing an effective learning environment and ways in which we can develop communication and contact with parents.

The aim of this book is to encourage staff in early years settings to explore how they can use the *Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5* document to:

- reexamine existing strategies for 'working with parents'
- establish priorities
- identify gaps
- locate areas for development.

Every context is different.

The focus is therefore not necessarily on introducing new ideas and practices but on emphasising the importance of developing existing interactions, communications and involvement.

SECTION ONE: SETTING THE SCENE: DEVELOPING RELATIONSHIPS WITH PARENTS

Working with parents is not a new concept for early educators. One of the main principles on which early education is based is the recognition that young children are 'active learners' whose first and most important learning experiences happen in and around the home and family. Many pre-school centres have already developed ways to encourage and build good relationships with parents. Working with parents can, however, be quite challenging when things do not turn out the way you had planned.

> *It can be so frustrating when events for parents end up with rows of empty chairs. There are some parents that never turn up. They're just not interested.*

It can be so easy to assume that non-attendance means lack of interest. But it is important to recognise that there can be many reasons why parents cannot attend parents' meetings. Competing family priorities and conflicting interests affect the extent to which parents want to or can become more actively involved.

The key to planning and organising effective communication and contact is to listen to parents.

Consider the parents' quotations below. Can these give us some insights into how we should move forward towards developing relationships with parents?

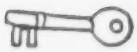
- *I'll always turn up if it's to hear about my own child.*
- *I have to work. There's precious little time to fulfil all of the different commitments I'm expected to.*
- *Women from our Asian community don't go out at night and I am busy in the shop all day.*
- *I really value the time she is in nursery as 'my time' to spend some time on my own ... or just to relax with friends without the kids being the centre of things.*
- *Nursery is my child's special world. She wouldn't want me to spend any more time there.*
- *I'd like to go to more of the meetings for parents but I have two-year-old twins to look after too. It's just not possible.*
- *I was an active member of the playgroup committee. Along with the playgroup leaders we made important decisions about organisation and planning.*

In planning and developing communication and contact with parents we need to acknowledge that:

- the majority of parents are interested
- they are particularly interested in their own child
- in every pre-school setting there will be particular groups of parents who may need specific support and consideration, but there will also be parents who have considerable experience of being actively involved.

Opportunities for involvement that we offer to parents must be meaningful, meet the expectations of individual parents and fit well with the realities of the lives of the families in our centres.

> *Each child is a unique individual. Each brings a different life story to the early years setting. Growing up as a member of a family and community with unique ways of understanding the world creates an individual pattern of learning and pace of development. It helps determine the child's views and attitudes.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52



Young children's learning and the roles parents play in supporting this cannot be seen in isolation from the wider, constantly changing needs of families and the communities in which they live.

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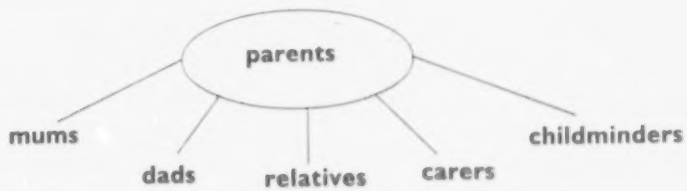
SETTING THE SCENE: WHO ARE OUR PARENTS?

The needs of young children, families and communities are constantly changing. Parents now choose from a wide variety of pre-school provision to meet these needs and yet we regularly use the term 'parent' as if we are referring to a common group of people. Every family is different and every individual pre-school establishment will encompass a wide diversity of parenting cultures and stages of family life. It is important that we are sensitive to the changing needs and expectations of the individual families within our own particular setting.

> *Having regard to the best interests of children means working with parents to recognise and give priority to meeting the individual needs of all children and at all times having regard for their welfare, safety and security.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 2

Who are our 'parents'?



Increasingly, family life involves a variety of adults. Shared expectation and beliefs are important characteristics of positive relationships. How can you be sure you remain sensitive to similarities when such a wide range of adults is bringing and collecting children?

• Parents of children new to the nursery/ centre	*Although my child has just started the nursery class she still goes to a private nursery too because that fits in better with my work.*	Why did parents choose your particular context? If it was based on the hours you offer because they enable parents to work, then parents are unlikely to be available to be involved in the nursery/centre during the working day. How can you make sure that these parents are offered equality of opportunity for involvement?
• Parents of returners or those whose siblings have been to our nursery/centre	*Now that my second child has started nursery I'm more relaxed and speak to the staff but I don't have anything really to ask about because I know how the nursery runs.*	These parents may be familiar with past routines and opportunities and may not feel the need to be involved to the same extent the second time around. How will you encourage them to see new opportunities?
• Parents of three-year-olds	*Sometimes I wonder if he is too young to go to nursery. His sister was four.*	These parents may need more reassurance about the balance of independence and support. How and when would you offer this?
• Parents of four-year-olds	*I think she needs to be with children that she'll go to school with. At home the twins are so much younger that they get in her way.*	Parents may be anxious about transition into school. How can you offer opportunities for them to share their fears and expectations? If there are younger siblings, what practical arrangements may be necessary if a 'family approach' to supporting children's learning is to be possible?

Early educators need to be sensitive to the changing needs of individual families. Expectations and relationships can change not only with the setting but also with the child and the family.

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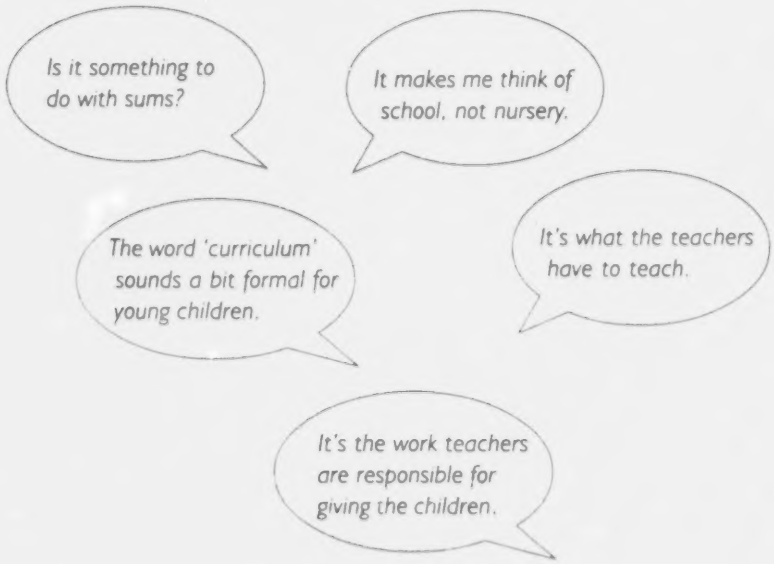
SECTION TWO: GETTING STARTED: A CURRICULUM FOR CHILDREN AGED 3–5. WHAT DOES IT MEAN?

Every pre-school context is different, but a key principle informs the role of all early educators. Everything we plan and develop in our centres, all learning experiences and interactions, are firmly based on what we know about young children as learners.

> *The learning process is complex. All learners have particular ways in which they tend to learn successfully. Learning, to be effective, needs to build on what the learner already knows and an understanding of the ways in which children learn.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 2

Young children learn from everything that happens to them and around them. The curriculum framework guides early educators as they provide a learning environment to support this learning.

Many parents, however, find the concept of a 'curriculum' in the pre-school years puzzling. When asked about their perceptions of the word 'curriculum', parents often pick out features relating to school, older children and their teachers.


Is it something to do with sums?
It makes me think of school, not nursery.
The word 'curriculum' sounds a bit formal for young children.
It's what the teachers have to teach.
It's the work teachers are responsible for giving the children.

Parents are unsure of how the formal word 'curriculum' relates to their expectations of their pre-school learning environment. What expectations *do* parents have for their children at this stage?

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For many parents the most important aspect of pre-school experience is their children's happiness and security.

We want our children to:
be secure and happy
have a very caring environment as close as possible to home
meet other children the same age
be helped to become more independent
have routine – kids thrive on that
have opportunities to build up their personality
relax and enjoy it and to look forward to going back the next day.
learn at nursery but only if they are ready for it. They start to learn numbers and the alphabet. That is part of it, but socialising is more important.

Do these parents' expectations for their young children suggest possible differences in the expectations and beliefs of parents and early educators?

The curriculum framework emphasises that supporting young children's learning involves more than nurturing their developing skills and knowledge. Feelings and relationships play an important part in children being ready, willing and able to learn.

> *Children develop understanding in many different ways but they learn best in an environment where they feel safe, secure and confident and have opportunities for enjoyment.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 3

It seems, then, that early educators are echoing the expectations and beliefs that parents have for their children at this stage. Both are seeking to develop children's confidence in what they can do, and to help them gain trust in their own abilities so that they become confident, competent learners who can use what they have learned in a variety of new experiences.

An important first step in working together with parents will be to open up early dialogue about the learning experiences we plan and provide for our young children.

Early educators have an important responsibility to make the first move – to reach out to parents – to reassure them that we are working on a joint venture.

> *... developing and broadening the range of children's learning experiences, to leave them confident eager and enthusiastic learners who are looking forward to school.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 1

However, we need to think carefully about the role we, as early educators, play in this joint venture. Before children come into our pre-school centres they have already gained a variety of knowledge, skills and experiences.

> *Young children come to early years settings as active, experienced learners with a natural curiosity. They are unique individuals eager to make sense of their world, to develop relationships and to extend their skills.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 3

Parents too have had an important role to play: they have already been developing their children's confidence in the social context of the home and family. It is therefore not a matter of us trying to involve parents; parents are already involved. Our role is to value, support and strengthen what parents are already doing with their children.

When parents and educators work together

both parents and early educators have information and experience to share.

Throughout the book the 'balance' symbol will be used to illustrate the direction of communication between educator and parents

The practical challenge is:

- to help parents understand the important connections between encouraging positive emotional, personal and social development in young children and the development of all aspects of learning
- to listen to parents to find out more about what they are already doing with their children.

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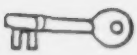
SEE ACTIVITY 1



There is a delicate balance to be struck between helping parents to understand how we support their children's learning, and valuing and building on the experiences and opportunities for learning that they offer in the home and family.

SECTION THREE: SHARING INFORMATION: TO AID INDUCTION AND TRANSITION

> *Children in early years settings have to learn to cope with people and settings outwith the family. In doing so they need to become increasingly independent and able to form positive social relationships, particularly with other children.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 8

The transition from home to any new environment can make a range of stressful demands on both parents and child. For many children, the nursery/centre will be their first step away from the familiar environments of home, family and friends. Early educators have a crucial role to play in welcoming families into the new environment and in establishing their feeling of confidence and belonging. We need to consider carefully how to develop 'settling-in' policies and procedures to help parents and children feel confident in making this first step.

Home visits

Many pre-school centres offer parents the choice of a home visit as the first part of the 'settling-in' process.

During a home visit, early years staff can share valuable information with the family.

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We couldn't believe it: the homelink teacher brought everything for us to make chocolate krispies. Having an activity to share really helped Daniel to relax and get to know her.

I liked getting some information about the nursery before James started.

The nursery booklet was left at our house. We could talk about it.

Meeting a member of the staff helped us to put a face to a name.

Lisa starting nursery was a big step for me too. Talking to a member of staff beforehand helped reassure me and she told me what the routines were and what I would be expected to do.

On my home visit I got given a book of photographs which showed us some of the things that happen in the nursery, like children hanging up coats, having snack and listening to a story. It was good for ideas for us to talk to Megan about what she would be doing when she started nursery.

The staff gave us sheets of paper and pencils, which we used at home to encourage Karen to draw. On our first day at nursery we took them with us. The staff were all really interested in the pictures she had drawn and asked her about them.

Parents value the information they get from the nursery/centre staff during home visits, but is the full potential of the communication we can have with parents during home visits being fully realised?

The early years of children's lives are ones of rapid growth and development. They enter their pre-school years with a significant background of learning experiences within their family and with friends, neighbours and relatives.
A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 2

Parents have a special knowledge of what their child can do. Home visits should also offer an opportunity for parents to share their knowledge of their child with us.

During a home visit, parents need the chance to tell us more about the learning experiences that they have shared with their child in and around the home and family.

Both staff and parents have information to give each other. Both staff and parents have information they need to acquire from each other. Home visits can help to open up two-way channels of communication about children's early learning.

When time is set aside for a home visit:

- early years staff
  - see the child's interactions and learning in a natural setting
  - learn more about how confident and competent the child is in and around the home
  - hear from parents what they already do to help their child at home
- parents
  - get your undivided attention
  - learn about the routines and activities in the nursery/centre
  - find out more about how in everyday routines they support their child's learning
  - have more time to ask questions, offer opinions and share information
- children
  - see parents and staff working together
  - build up a special relationship with a staff member that eases their transition into nursery/centre
  - enjoy meeting the member of staff on their home ground
  - begin to create links between home and pre-school: 'Eh, you've been to my house. You saw my budgie.'

Home visiting is a very valuable way of encouraging families to share their knowledge of their child with us; but all contexts are different and not all pre-school settings offer home visits to parents.

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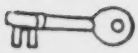
The practical challenge is:
to think carefully about how we can begin to develop positive relationships with our families, towards welcoming them and promoting a feeling of confidence and belonging in the new environment.

SEE ACTIVITY 2



Communication and contact with our families is an integral part of home–school relations. Sharing information with parents is an ongoing process, not a one-off opportunity.

SHARING INFORMATION: TO DEVELOP A FEELING OF CONFIDENCE

The first few days in all pre-school centres are important in the relationships between early educators and families. Staff, parents and children establish personal contact, get to know each other and share expectations and concerns.

> *Developing warm, supportive relationships with children and other adults creates a climate in which children feel confident to tackle new challenges and where children can see mistakes as part of the learning process.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 44

Early educators have an important role to play in ensuring both parents and children experience an environment in which they feel comfortable and confident. The phrase 'creating a warm, welcoming environment' is commonly used to describe what we try to do to ease the move into our pre-school centre, but to what extent does this meet the specific needs and concerns families have when they first come to our setting?

The curriculum framework highlights that changes can be stressful for all children but that for our youngest children they can be particularly upsetting. Parents may be particularly anxious if their child is only three years old.

We have an important role to play in sharing with parents how, in providing for our youngest children, we offer:

> *an environment that balances familiar and predictable routines with challenges and surprises … supported by adults who offer emotional support, praise and encouragement.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 4

Example from practice

We put a notice on our parents' board to help parents to understand more about how we help our younger children settle in.

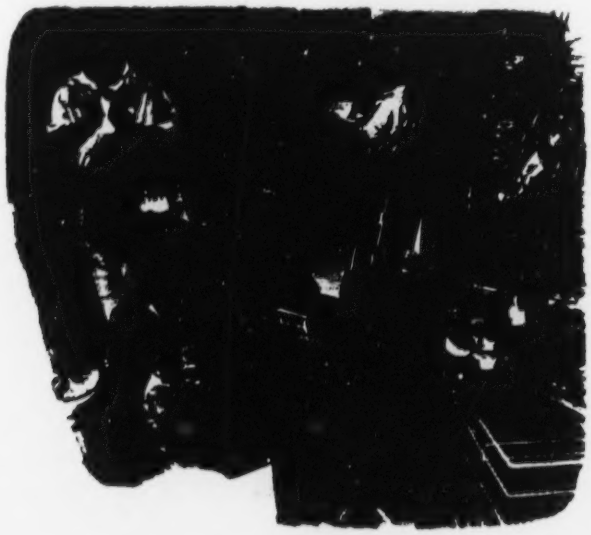
NOTICE

Dazzled by the range of activities on offer, three-year-olds may not know which way to turn. It's more interesting to explore the layout of rooms and *try* to remember some of the rules – such as not running indoors.

We help our youngest children by:

- adopting the same routine on arrival every day
- gradually introducing new routines
- offering them safe and secure places, for example a rocking horse, from which to observe what everyone else is doing
- giving them the opportunity to go to a familiar member of staff
- inviting you as parents and carers to stay and play with your child until they become more confident and independent.

Offering reassurance to parents is an important responsibility for early educators, but consider this: before children come to our pre-school setting, parents *have already* been sharing experiences with their children to help ease the transition from home to the pre-school setting.



- ***We help our children to become more independent.***

I encouraged my children to know their own name, address and telephone number.

My kids get themselves washed and dressed in the morning.

Harry loves making his own chocolate-spread sandwiches

I bought Kevin trousers with an elasticated waist so he could go to the toilet by himself.

Well I knew he couldn't tie his shoelaces but thank goodness I discovered Velcro! He can do his own shoes up now just like his brothers.

We need to listen to parents. Parents can help us discover more about the shared experiences that have taken place in and around the home. They can give us valuable insights into the family routines that have helped their children to feel safe, secure and confident.

- ***We gradually make changes to our family routine to help our children feel more confident.***

We walked past the nursery playground on the way to the shops so that Kai could see the children out playing in the nursery grounds.

We met friends she'll be going to playgroup with. It gave them the chance to play together and the adults enjoyed getting together over a cup of coffee too. It brought us all together.

- ***We talk about 'going to nursery/playgroup'.***

I don't make too much of a fuss. I waited till questions came and then talked about it. We talked about it and said it would be fun.

We got a storybook from the library about a wee boy and his first day at nursery and read together.

Her big sister has just started school and she's always telling Hannah about the things she enjoyed doing in nursery.

Jayne has been to playgroup. Her friends talk about nursery. Playgroup to nursery was a natural progression.

Her grandpa is always telling her about his memories of the 'old days' in nursery school.

Parents may have been sharing a wide range of experiences with their child in the home and family context to help ease the transition from home to pre-school. However, it can be difficult for them to see how these helped their child's confidence and wellbeing during their first days in your nursery/centre.

Parents need our continuing support:

- to make connections between home experiences and experiences in our pre-school setting
- to understand fully the significance of everyday routines in supporting their child's transition from home to the pre-school setting.

One of the most effective ways of doing this will be to highlight the complementary roles we play in developing children's awareness of themselves and in developing their self-confidence.

There are lots of new faces. Children may be anxious about being separated from the people they know.		As your child is settling in we: • give time for one-to-one interactions • stagger the intake of new children • invite you to stay with your child in the nursery/centre over a period of time • offer you tea/coffee in our parents' room so that you can stay near your child but separate from him/her for a short period • encourage you to tell us about your child's previous experiences of being away from home and how he/she interacts with others in the family context.
		At home we support our children by: • talking positively about their 'new experience' • gradually adapting family routines • helping them to make links between pre-school experiences • interacting and sharing time with them as they explore the new setting • encouraging them to 'have a voice' in the family – for example ask questions, etc.
		Together we are helping children to: • develop confidence, self-esteem and a sense of security • form positive relationships with children and adults • gradually become more independent.

Everything will be new to the child. They may not feel confident about joining in all of the different activities around them.		In the first few weeks of nursery we: • gradually introduce new routines • give children their 'special' pegs, name tags, etc. • provide a safe and stimulating environment • allow children space and time to stand back and watch others at play and choose their own time to join in • observe carefully each child's reactions to the new environment and experiences offered.
		At home we support our children by encouraging them to: • talk about themselves and their experiences • become more independent in dressing • make choices • build up a little more space from us • develop friendships and play with friends.
		Together we are helping your child to: • become confident in the early years setting • feel a sense of security and belonging • listen to other children and adults during social activities and play • express his feelings, needs and preferences.

SEE ACTIVITY 3

When parents and staff work together, children value each other's role during their early days in our nursery/centre. Children:

- develop confidence, self-esteem and a sense of security
- form positive relationships with other children and adults
- begin to care for themselves and their personal safety
- gain independence.

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SHARING INFORMATION: TO DEVELOP A FEELING OF BELONGING

> *For younger children, familiar daily routines such as 'welcoming' and 'farewell' help to foster a sense of belonging and develop the social awareness so vital to successful learning.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 44

The communication and contact that we develop with parents in the early days of their pre-school experience 'sets the scene' for future relationships. The information we give to parents when they first come to pre-school will influence the extent to which parents feel valued as active members of our pre-school community throughout the time their children are in our care.

The nursery/centre handbook is often the first written communication that we give parents. Typically it sets out our nursery/centre aims and gives parents information about the staff, their roles and about routines within the setting, and highlights opportunities for parents to be actively involved. Our booklets, however, usually set these out in a very general way. Below are some broad statements commonly used in nursery/centre booklets, and the reactions of some parents to them.

'Open door policy'

Our nursery has got a security answerphone and I'm sometimes embarrassed talking into it.

It all depends on the attitude of individual staff towards you and your child.

Everyone is friendly enough but it's easy to feel you're in the way with so much going on.

'Any help you give is appreciated'

A lot of it is about raising funds for the centre.

I'd like more specific information about what is expected.

I don't know how to say this, but you sometimes get the feeling that some people's help is more valued than others.

'We want to share your child's achievements'

Well I know if the staff don't say anything then there's no problem.

I feel I would be taking up valuable staff time if I stopped to talk about my child.

As long as she's happy that's good enough for me.

My child is like a thermometer; I get to know what is happening by her moods.

Two-way communication?

Of course I always want to help my child but often I'm not sure what are the right and the wrong ways.

I would tell the staff if something out of the ordinary happened at home, but that's not often.

The staff always tell us just to come to them if we have questions or concerns. They'd find the time for you but I worry that I'll ask something I should already know.

Often staff take it for granted that you know what it all means.

To what extent do these general statements meet parents' needs for information in the first few days?

Parents need and want basic detailed information to familiarise them with the new setting. Even if families have had experience of another setting they realise that pre-school settings can have different expectations and routines.

Well I needed to know all the basic rules, like how much I had to pay for snack and what clothes they needed to bring.

It's really important to get to know who the staff are.

I think names are important and it's important to know whether we call them by their first name or by their title.

You don't want to be blinded by information but you need to know who's who and what the routines are.

I had only been to a mother and toddler's group before nursery so it was useful to find out more about the nursery times and what I was expected to do every day when we came into the nursery.

In our nursery booklets, we explain the basic routines that we have in place to help both parents and children to feel a sense of belonging and wellbeing in their new setting. We may be meeting parents' immediate need for basic information but are we realising the full potential of this exchange of information?

Our centre routines and rituals are carefully considered so as to be meaningful in supporting and extending children's learning. Many parents, however, do not readily make a direct connection between everyday routines and opportunities for learning.

The picture alongside the name on their coat-hook begins with the same letter as their name.

I didn't realise that ... but ... yes, Megan has a moon on her picture.

Neither did I realise that but I wondered why Quinton has a question mark at his hook.

Early educators have an important role to play in helping parents to see that everyday routines and rituals are important in encouraging children to become more independent and take ownership of their own learning.

When you come into our nursery you may see:

- that individual pegs have children's names and special pictures on them
  - they are encouraged to recognise familiar words and letters
  - sense of belonging
- children setting the table for snack
  - being aware of daily time sequences
  - becoming more independent at mealtimes
  - sorting and categorising into groups
- children putting on aprons to play in the water
  - developing increasing independence
  - being aware of safety and hygiene
- that everything children need is 'at hand' for them
  - they are encouraged to make and express choices, plans and decisions
  - children tidying up
  - increasing independence and care for the environment.

In your existing centre booklet or brochure, are you missing an important opportunity to encourage two-way communication that allows both educators and parents to make connections between everyday centre routines and everyday family routines?

The practical challenge is:

- to highlight for parents that our routines and procedures are carefully thought out to help and support and extend children's development and learning
- to help parents to see links between everyday routines in our centre and everyday routines in the home.

SEE ACTIVITY 4

Parents who have a good understanding about what early educators are doing to support their child's learning are far more likely to be supportive than parents who lack information and feel uncertain about how their children learn.

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SHARING INFORMATION: PROVIDING A STARTING POINT FOR THE PLANNING AND PROVISION OF LEARNING EXPERIENCES

> *The starting point for all learning is the child, and this requires a recognition of the particular experiences the children bring to the early years setting and the ways in which these are fostered and developed.*
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 4

The particular knowledge and skills that young children gain in and around the home provide a starting point for the planning and provision of learning experiences. However, it can be difficult for educators to identify what 'everyday experiences' are for individual families.

If effective connections are to be made between learning experiences in the home and family and opportunities for learning in our pre-school settings are to be made apparent then:

- parents need to help us to understand more about the learning opportunities they have at home
- early educators need to help parents make connections between the child's learning experiences in pre-school and the learning opportunities they have shared with their child at home and in the community.

> *The links with home need to be made obvious and using techniques such as 'all about me' books can be helpful in building the bridge between the child's home and the early years setting.*
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 9

'All about me' books can be effective in encouraging two-way communication so that connections between children's learning experiences at home and at nursery/centre can be made apparent to both parents and early educators.

An equal 'balance'

As parents, staff and child add their contribution to the pages of this book they:

- share information
- jointly decide about what to include
- discuss learning experiences in both contexts
- reflect on the interactions they have with each other
- make links between the home and pre-school setting
- gain more understanding of the ways in which children learn.

But consider – even when the child is an active member of our pre-school community, many of their learning experiences *will continue* to take place in the social context of home and family.

> *Parents are children's prime educators in their earliest years and they continue to play a major role in their young child's learning when they enter the early years setting.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

The development of young children's learning depends on early educators recognising and building on children's continuing experiences, but it can be so easy for us to underestimate the rich, informal knowledge and experience that children continue to gain in and around the home.

The staff were amazed that he could follow the instructions for the game but we play that game a lot at home.

I was surprised that she spent a lot of time doing the alphabet jigsaw because she could do it at home a while ago.

Consider the potential implications if we fail to recognise and value children's existing skills and knowledge.

- A gap may be created between everyday learning experiences in the home and the learning experiences in our centre.
- Parents may be led to believe that what they do at home with their child cannot possibly be as important as the experiences they encounter in your centre.
- Children's beliefs of what is worth learning and their future motivation for learning could be affected.
- The learning experiences provided may not match children's developing skills, interests and needs.

The practical challenge is:
to continue to support and strengthen the role of parents by valuing what parents are doing to support their young child's learning once the child is at pre-school.

SEE ACTIVITY 5

Accessing the knowledge, understanding and skills that children gain in the context of family, friends and neighbours needs to be an ongoing process.

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SECTION FOUR: COMMUNICATION AND CONTACT WITH PARENTS: MEETING CHANGING INTERESTS AND NEEDS

> *This is a time of rapid growth in all aspects of children's development. Adults need to provide daily opportunities that encourage children to practise newly developed skills and to plan for experiences through which they will acquire confidence and competence.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 4

Family needs and concerns change. The information that we give parents in the early days of their nursery experience needs to be responsive to these changes. Is the general information that we share with parents enough to meet these changing needs and concerns?

Settling in isn't just when they first start – it's every day with my child. It all depends on what mood she's in, especially after holidays and weekends.

I read the nursery booklet so long ago I can't remember what it said, but I think it was pretty general. It's not something you refer back to much when your child is in nursery.

Many parents find booklets or pamphlets about particular issues to be effective in giving them the specific information they need at different stages in their child's pre-school experience.

There's loads of stuff on the coffee table in the playgroup. I only take the things that interest me at the time.

Over the year I've picked up a lot of interesting leaflets about different things that my child was doing at the time.

Reading through a leaflet can help give parents the confidence they need to ask the pre-school staff team more specific questions.

I read the storytelling booklet and it helped me with ideas but then I had to ask Mrs M. what I should do when my child wants to jump over a few pages in the middle of the story. The booklet didn't say anything about that!

Listening to the questions parents ask, and valuing parental feedback on the usefulness and the limitations of these leaflets can help us make decisions about future leaflets.

My son really enjoyed the nursery rhyme but his favourite rhymes weren't in it. I told the playgroup leader and a 'second edition' was made, which included new rhymes. Our favourite was one of them.

The practical challenge is:
to develop a range of written communications that are sensitive to and address changing needs, interests and concerns.

SEE ACTIVITY 6

When early educators are responsive to parental needs, views and experience and value their contributions, parents' confidence in and commitment to their role in supporting their children's learning is enhanced.

COMMUNICATION AND CONTACT WITH PARENTS: ENSURING REGULAR CONTACT AND CONTINUING SHARING OF INFORMATION

Written communication to individual families is a regular form of contact, but parents identify the limitations there can be to these.

Sometimes you get handed a newsletter but then I forget where I've put it.

Staff in the centre give us lots of letters and notes but I must admit I often read them too quickly and don't really take in what they are saying.

> *Continued two-way communication is important to a successful partnership. Regular informal contacts as children are brought to the early years setting and collected are useful for exchanging information about children.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

Day-to-day contact

In pre-school settings, as children are brought to and from nursery, early educators have a unique opportunity to have regular daily contact with parents and carers. Staff believe face-to-face contact at these times is very valuable. Parents, too, greatly value and enjoy time to chat with staff at the beginning and end of the day, but both parents and staff agree that the beginning and end of nursery sessions can be 'pretty chaotic', with little chance to talk. At the beginning and end of each session, staff, parents and children all have their own needs that must also be taken into account.

Feelings expressed by early educators include the following.

- *When parents come to collect their children it seems to be a rush. Maybe they have children to pick up from school or maybe they are just tired. It tends not to be as one might hope – to come in and spend a bit of time.*
- *In our setting, the beginning and end of each session should be the 'child's time'. Each day, as they come from home into our centre, they need time, space and our support to settle in at their own pace.*
- *At the beginning and end of session we want to be 'on hand' to support and observe our children as they come together and leave each other. Observing them at this time gives us valuable information about each individual child and the confidence with which children separate from parents and meet other children.*

Parents, too, identify a number of reasons why contact time is limited.

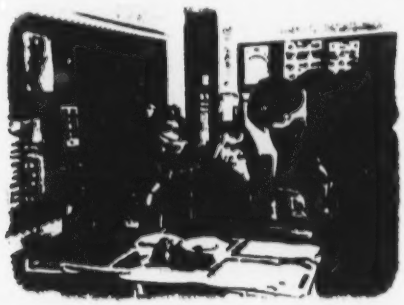
- 'We've got to rush off to work.'
  - *'Sometimes I feel I don't have time to take the car key out of the ignition; I've got to get to my work on time.'*
- 'We've got younger children to look after too.'
  - *'The pushchairs block up the cloakroom so we need to get out as quickly as we can.'*
- 'There are other family routines to consider.'
  - *'If you're sharp it's more difficult because there are lots of children and parents still there. If you are late you have more chance of talking to the staff.'*
- 'Sometimes we ask friends or relatives to bring or collect our child.'
  - *'I know a mum that never brings her child to the nursery. The granny does it some days and so the mum misses out.'*
- 'Some parents have more to say to the staff than others.'
  - *'Trouble is keeping it [communication] to a reasonable time if more parents want to talk.'*
- 'The staff have to welcome all of the children.'
  - *'When we go in, Mrs M. gives her attention to the children and talks to them to make sure they are settling OK.'*

Exchanging information with parents at the beginning and end of each session is important, and yet both parents and staff recognise that, in reality, time to share information at the beginning and end of each session is often quite limited. Face-to-face contact is crucial in developing our relationships with parents, but we need to be realistic about what we can expect to achieve at the beginning and end of each session.

> *It is necessary to recognise the central importance of relationships as the basis on which all learning takes place, whether in the early years setting or the child's wider world.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 2

If *all* parents are to have an equal opportunity for regular, meaningful interactions with staff, then early educators need to develop and put into practice clear p cedures.

Arrival and departure are important times. The routines encouraged help in developing the quality of the interaction and talk that goes on between parent/staff, child/parent and parent/parent.



The practical challenge is to:

- look for ways of creating and maintaining an effective communication system that offers a variety of opportunities for both parents and early educators to communicate with each other
- share information about the child's learning, which brings together all the contexts in which young children learn.

Pigeon holes

'Pigeon holes' are not a substitute for face-to-face contact, but they can offer a way of maintaining regular communication with parents who do not bring/collect their children. They can be particularly useful for sending confidential or personal messages to individual parents.

I know a mum who doesn't pick her child up. She misses things.

The personal folder is better for me. I can have a quick glance and see if I have picked everything up.

You know that what is in the pigeon hole is relevant to you and your child.

At least I can see anything that his dad has forgotten to pick up.

When the childminder picks Peter up she always has a quick look to see if I'm missing anything.

Parents need to have opportunities to contribute their ideas and views. Consider how you would encourage parents to use 'pigeon holes' and 'personal folders' to share information with you.

Parents' communication board

When displayed in a prominent position, a parents' board can be effective in reinforcing the information given in newsletters or booklets and can offer additional opportunities for parents to access information on a daily basis.

It's a good way of finding out about things quickly if I'm really rushing.
I can always look at the board because a copy of the newsletter is there.

In developing our communication and contact with parents, we are seeking to bring together all of the resources that both parents and children can draw on.

Parents' communication boards can:

- create links between the home, community and pre-school context

  It's not just notices about the centre. There are often posters up about things that are on near us. Three of us took our kids to a dancing class that we saw advertised. They enjoyed it more because they all went together.

- help to maintain open channels of communication

  When you see 'sign up' to be involved in different things, you know exactly what you have to do and you get to see who else is going to be there.

- keep parents in touch with what their children are doing

  The staff in our centre put up a copy of what is happening that week. They call it their plan. I remember when they told us that at story time they were showing the children how to look at the front page of a book and how to hold the book the right way up. I'd never thought about doing that when I read William a story.

- help identify links between learning at home and learning at nursery.

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Example from practice

We stop off for a cup of tea there every time we go shopping.

You should see the mess of my kitchen when they play at ice cream shops with soap suds as the ice cream.

NOTICE

This week some of the children were playing at cafés. They used dress-ups and large blocks to set up the dining area. Mrs Harris took a group of children to the library to find some books about food and eating out. David's mum came too. She works in the local supermarket and she asked the manager if we could bring some children into the café there. When they got back the children made up a menu and made little flags on stands with numbers on them so that we would know which table to take the food to.

In the supermarket there was background music and the children asked for the tape recorder so they could play music in their café.

I took my kids to see the 'Singing Kettle' and they loved going for a treat in the café afterwards.

I make up dough in the house for them to make things out of and play at shops.

Inviting parents' comments can bring together the two different worlds of home and pre-school and can help both parents and early educators find out more about children's interests and experiences.

I always look to see what is written on the board. It can be really interesting to read what other parents are saying.

Have you thought about giving parents a space on your communication board to encourage parent–parent communication?

Open days and meetings

> *Open days and meetings can provide a useful opportunity to discuss the curriculum with parents. An important focus of such meetings should be to reaffirm the contribution of parents to their children's learning and to suggest ways of supporting their learning at home.*
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

Many parents are keen to find out more about how the activities they see their child enjoying help their child's learning. They value an invitation to come into the nursery to hear more about these learning experiences. They may enjoy spending time in the nursery context to find out more about the activities their child enjoys on a daily basis.

Organising open days, workshops and meetings can be one way for parents to build up a deeper understanding of how children learn in the pre-school setting.

I know a lot of parents didn't go to the workshops on literacy because they were all frightened that it would be about their own reading.

But consider when organising meetings or open days it is important that all parents have a clear idea about the purpose as well as the content of the meeting.

We were invited to the nursery to hear more about what children do in nursery. As the staff were telling us about what they do in nursery with our children, they asked us to tell them about other things we did at home. I would never speak up in front of other people, but at the last meeting I went to there was a pen and paper on our seats and we could jot down the things that occurred to us, if we would rather do that, and give our bits of paper to a member of staff. After the coffee break, we had a discussion about all of the ideas.

When organising meetings or open days, it is important that all parents feel confident in making a contribution.

Parents enjoy open days and meetings, especially when they can be actively involved.

The most successful meetings are those that are friendly but have a defined purpose, and where parents are given the opportunity and time to be actively involved and to share their opinions and experiences rather than attend as passive listeners.

> *In order to plan learning experiences that will meet each individual child's needs it is important to find out as much as possible about the child and to build on this by working together with homes and families ....*
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

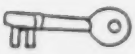
Planned Open Days and meetings should offer a forum for two-way discussion.

Early educators	Can provide parents with information about how different activities and experiences support and enhance children's learning.
Parents	Can share important information with staff about the many varied experiences and activities children have shared with family and friends

The practical challenge is to strike a balance between:

- the information parents want from us
- the information we give to our parents
- the information we want from our parents.

SEE ACTIVITY 7



When early educators encourage parental participation in the organisation and planning of Open Days and meetings, parents are more likely to feel they are valued members of the pre-school learning community and are more likely to enjoy contributing to their child's wider learning experiences.

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COMMUNICATION AND CONTACT WITH PARENTS: ENCOURAGING DEEPER AND MORE MEANINGFUL DISCUSSION WITH PARENTS ABOUT EARLY DEVELOPMENT AND LEARNING

Displays

Displays are a prominent feature in many pre-school settings. These often help to create a warm and welcoming environment, but displays are not just attractive areas.

I wish I could be a fly on the wall.

On a regular basis, parents are keen to know what their child is doing in the nursery. They often look to the displays and the children's work on the walls for clues about what is happening.

I noticed the three bears and books about bears and could see they were doing a theme.

Models and gluings they bring home give us a clue.

It was interesting. She remembered her granny's birthday. The cereal box came back home again but it had paint on it and was now a jewellery box as a birthday present.

Parents are keen to see their child's work. Children are proud and excited to show off to their parents what they have made. The finished product is important to both of them.

Early educators have an important role to play in helping parents to understand what their children have learned and achieved on each step of the way to creating the finished product. We need to explore ways of using children's finished work to 'spark off' interesting discussions between parent and child and between staff and parents about the 'enjoyment, expression and learning that takes place during the experience rather than on finished products'.

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Examples from practice

We value the process as well as the product.

Thomas made a model of the Titanic. He carefully cut out many white shapes to represent steam. Amy discovered that she could wrap presents using string, Sellotape or glue. She persevered for a long time and was proud that she wrapped presents again and again.

Both children took their model home, but it is not the finished product that matters. Achievement, satisfaction and pride are all emotions your child will want to share when they bring their designs home.

> *The three-year-olds weren't so interested in the process of following a recipe or what came next. They enjoyed doing things: feeling the mixture, touching the flour and so on. They were very interested in the syrup and its properties – how sticky it was – and they enjoyed eating them for snack!*

The staff did not miss the opportunity of highlighting for parents the enjoyment, expression and learning of the younger children!

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When parents take their child's work home they often display it to show family and friends.

We've created a display of Gavin's nursery paintings on his bedroom wall.

Do you encourage parents to tell you what they do with their child's work when they take it home from nursery?

> *Displays of children's work and photographs with captions explaining the learning gained from activities and experiences will help to share the aims of education with parents.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

Displays can:

- give parents information that keeps them in touch with their children's experiences and learning
- encourage parental involvement, for example contribute items and ideas for the display
- encourage children to explain and share their ideas and work with their parents.

The practical challenge is:
to consider how we use displays to encourage deeper and more meaningful discussion with parents about early development and learning.

SEE ACTIVITY 8

Careful consideration as to how and where information is shared with parents can encourage a more meaningful exchange about children's development and learning between parents, educators and children.

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SECTION FIVE: WORKING TOGETHER: ENCOURAGING PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN THE PRE-SCHOOL

> *Partnership can also be strengthened by encouraging parents to see themselves as active and valued members of the early years community, involved in day-to-day learning experiences, planning and participating in events and visits, organising social events and helping to raise funds for specific projects.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 53

Parents are regularly involved in many pre-school settings. Encouraging parents to come into the nursery/centre is one way for parents to build up a deeper understanding of how children learn in the pre-school setting and there are many benefits when parents have the opportunity to work alongside children and staff in the nursery.

Parental involvement in the nursery/centre can help staff to challenge stereotypes and assumptions.

> *Well it gave the children and staff something to think about when I said I would come and bake a cake with the kids. The staff were surprised that I was interested in baking and a lot of the children said, 'My dad could never bake a cake!'*

Children and staff gain from the skills and interests of parents.

> *At first I wasn't too sure about going into the nursery, but the children and staff made me feel welcome. They asked me a lot of questions about my job as a postman. One wee boy kept on calling me Postman Pat! I gave them an old hat – not a cat! I helped the children set up a postbox in the nursery.*

Parental involvement in the nursery/centre can help staff to build up a deeper understanding of how children's learning is supported by parents at home.

> *We do a lot of things to raise money for the nursery and, when we have the money we all get together with the staff to discuss what we are going to spend it on. It brings a lot of us together and we always end up chatting about the different things our children have and do at home.*

Parents' interests, skills and expertise enhance the learning opportunities provided.

I organise and run the nursery library. I'm often left thinking about my own children and about how storybooks can help them too.

Parental involvement in the nursery/centre can help build a sense of common purpose and help both staff and parents to see links between children's learning experiences at home and at pre-school.

Being around in the nursery helps you to feel good, especially when you see that some of the things your children can do at home is giving them confidence in nursery.

Parents' expectation of what their child can do is enhanced.

I took my tools into the nursery to fix the hamster-cage door. A couple of kids brought a hammer and nails from their woodwork bench and started hammering in nails beside me. I was really taken aback – their tools were about as good as mine. They kept asking questions about what I was doing. I was surprised how well they handled real tools like that.

Parents awareness of children's emotional and social development is enhanced.

I love the sense of humour some children have and the way they help and comfort each other.

As parents learn more about what practical things they can do to help their child their own confidence is enhanced.

Developing Strategies

Every pre-school establishment encompasses a wide diversity of parents and family situations. Different parents will welcome the opportunity to be actively involved in different ways.

Some parents welcome the opportunity to be actively involved alongside the children.

I enjoy reading stories to the children in the nursery

It's great being able to go in and help with baking or the children's snack.

I help set up a home lending library and we run it every Thursday.

We must be aware that the starting point for developing opportunities for parental involvement is the parent. When deciding how we can encourage parents to be more actively involved we need to listen to our parents.

I help a lot in the nursery. It's good to see what children and staff do, but there's one thing I remember about being involved in the nursery that I didn't enjoy very much. A storytelling day was organised and parents were asked if they would read or tell stories to the children. I get tongue-tied when all of the children are watching me and I don't think I have a very good accent so, although I took part, I was relieved when it was over!

I am interested in helping the children at the computer but I have to practise myself first so I'm having a go in the Parents' room.

Not all parents will want to be directly involved with children but they may welcome an opportunity to help with practical tasks or fund-raising events in another area of the nursery/centre.

A group of us sit in the parents' room and cut up paper and card for the painting and gluing areas.

I love gardening and I often help keep the weeds down in the outdoor area.

We often go in to tidy up the book cupboard for the staff.

We need to listen to our parents:

- to find out about the skills and interests that they may want to share
- to identify the support and information individual parents may need.

We need to be explicit to parents about how their involvement links to children's learning. By sharing with parents the aims of the activity they are involved in, what their role is and what the children are expected to do, you can help parents to understand more about the important role that adults play in supporting children's learning.

> *When staff and parents work together to support children's learning, it can have significant positive effects on the way in which children value themselves and those around them.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 52

It is important to keep uppermost in our minds that our joint venture is that of supporting children's learning. We need to recognise that the potential of parental involvement goes beyond offering 'help' and 'an extra pair of hands'.

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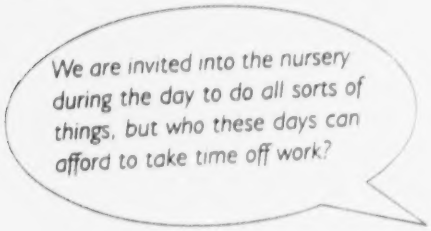
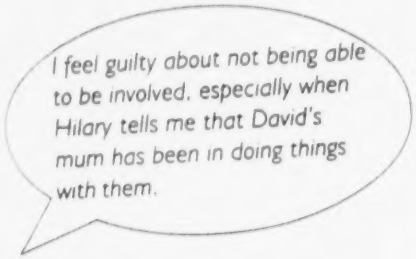
When parents are encouraged to see themselves as active and valued members of the pre-school community opportunities are offered for:

- staff to explain aims for parents
- parents to share their knowledge and experience of their child with staff
- parent-to-parent communication and contact
- parents to find support and gain confidence in the nursery environment. It is also valuable in developing good working relationships between staff and parents.

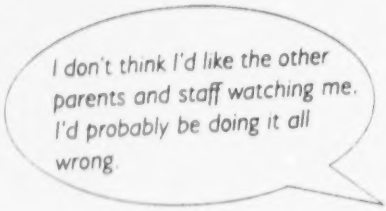
There are many benefits for children, educators and parents when parents work alongside staff and children within the pre-school centre, but it is very important that not all of the emphasis should be on getting parents into the early years setting.

Some parents may not be able to be involved within your centre and may feel excluded.

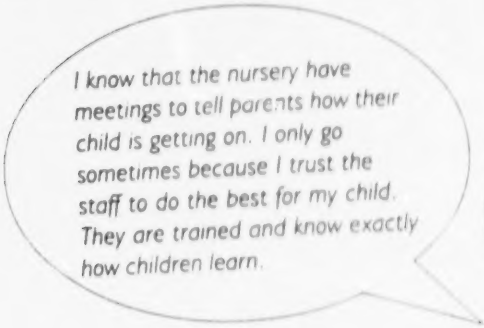


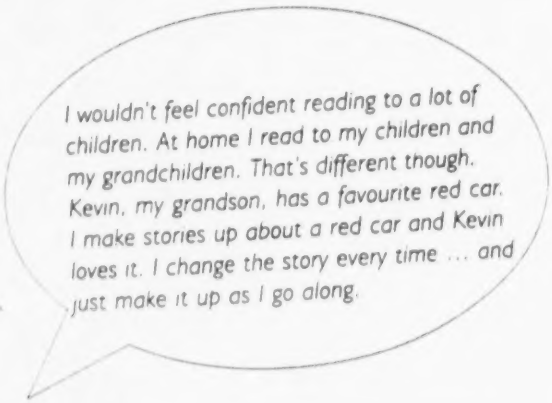

I feel guilty about not being able to be involved, especially when Hilary tells me that David's mum has been in doing things with them.

Some parents may lack the confidence to work alongside staff and children.



Limiting strategies to a centre-based approach may not emphasise the importance of the home and community in supporting children's learning.


I know that the nursery have meetings to tell parents how their child is getting on. I only go sometimes because I trust the staff to do the best for my child. They are trained and know exactly how children learn.


I wouldn't feel confident reading to a lot of children. At home I read to my children and my grandchildren. That's different though. Kevin, my grandson, has a favourite red car. I make stories up about a red car and Kevin loves it. I change the story every time ... and just make it up as I go along.

Encouraging parental involvement within the nursery context should be only one of many ways to involve parents. We need to offer a network of strategies from which parents can choose ways in which they can be or want to be involved.

Example from practice

> *... children should learn to ... listen and respond to the sounds and rhythm of words in ... rhymes ... .*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 16

In our nursery we developed a number of different ways of providing this learning opportunity. Not all of our parents can or want to come into nursery so we let them choose.

Look at our display to find out what rhyme we are enjoying this week in the nursery.

Gavin's favourite rhyme at home is Humpty Dumpty. We told Miss Carr and she asked him to bring in his book for the display.

We have a good selection of rhyme books and tapes in our home lending library.

We've got some good story tapes at home. The children now want new stories. We gave the old favourites to the nursery to add to their collection.

Your child will enjoy spending time with you listening to favourite rhymes.

Hearing and enjoying songs and rhymes helps to develop an enthusiasm for books and stories.

Our rhyme experience corridor beside the cloakroom gives you a chance to talk with your child about rhymes and stories as you tie shoe laces and zip up jackets.

Puppet making workshops are taking place in the Community Centre next door on Tuesday.

I saw that Jane's mum had signed up for this so I put my name down too.

It's a great five minutes of fun at the start of the day.

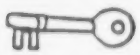
Our parent and child rhyme club takes place every Thursday.

I can't make it to the club but the staff gave me an activity sack to take home to share with my child.

The practical challenge is:
to develop a network of strategies that encourage parental involvement in a variety of contexts for:

- parents who are keen to support the wider context of the nursery, be involved with their own child and be confident in talking to staff
- parents who particularly want to be involved with their own child's learning outwith the context of the nursery
- parents who would like to be involved but lack the confidence to do so.

SEE ACTIVITY 9



The opportunities we offer for parents to become more actively involved gives parents a strong message about the role they play in their child's learning. Early educators have an important role to play in helping parents to understand the importance of the learning that goes on 'beyond the pre-school centre gate'.

53

WORKING TOGETHER: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT IN OUTINGS AND VISITS

> *By visiting other places in the locality and observing and talking about the routines and jobs of people that they meet in the nursery and the community, they will extend their experience of home and family.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 23

We carefully plan outings and visits from our pre-school centres into the wider community. These provide opportunities for children to investigate, to explore and to use their senses to develop their understanding and knowledge of the world. Often we depend on parental involvement for outings to take place. We use parents as 'helpers' to raise the adult–child ratio, but encouraging parental involvement on outings offers an opportunity for parents to be more than merely an 'extra pair of hands'.

By sharing the purpose of the trip with parent helpers *before the outing* parents can begin to see how visits and outings link to children's wider experiences in the nursery and at home.

Going on the nursery visit to the library was a real eye-opener for me. It wasn't just going on the day to the library to hear a story. We met with the staff for a cup of tea before the outing and they explained some of the things we had to point out to the children on the way … like the postbox to encourage them to talk about the post office they had set up in the nursery …. I was surprised at how many children were excited because they had been there before. They were so keen to tell me about all the times they had been to the post office and the library with different people in their family.

Working alongside staff on outings can influence parents' interactions with their own children.

I just take the lead from the teachers …. I watch how they handle the children and then try to do the same.

Outings stimulate talk and discussion about learning between parents and staff.

I remember when I was helping on the playgroup outing, the play leader told me the wee boy, Craig, had recognised his name on the street sign, 'Craighall Road'. But I said, 'He's not really reading; he just recognises it.' Miss Gordon explained to me how pointing out letters and words that children recognise helps them with their reading.

Encouraging parental involvement on trips can provide them with ideas about local places that they can revisit with their families.

Going to the zoo was brilliant! I went back again at the weekend and took my sister's kids as well.

Actively involving parents on outings can give them ideas and information about how they can extend their child's experience, but it is important that early educators recognise the considerable knowledge and experience that parents will have of the community in which they live.

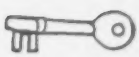
Parents are a valuable source of information about places of interest in the community and key people to introduce to the children. We need to encourage parents to share with us what they know about activities and facilities in the local community.

I work on the checkout of the local supermarket. In the nursery the children have set up a baker's shop. I asked my boss if they could come in and see the bakery department and they really enjoyed coming in and seeing all the different loaves of bread.

Parents who regularly volunteer to help out on trips can be a valuable resource for other parents, extending their knowledge of place in the local area.

A group of us made a wee book about all the trips that we've been on with the nursery and put it in the parents' room. We put in a lot of detail, like if you could walk there and, if not, how much the bus fare was and how much you had to pay to get in to different places..

When parents and staff work together to organise and plan outings and visits, the two worlds of the child are brought together. Staff can begin to identify the experiences that children and parents have already had together. Parents are encouraged to share with staff the knowledge and experiences they have of the local community.



Young children gain lots of exxperience in and around the home and community. Early educators must explore how, together with parents, they can build on and experience these.

WORKING TOGETHER: PLAY MAKES A POWERFUL CONTRIBUTION TO CHILDREN'S LEARNING

Children develop understanding in many different ways but they learn best in an environment where they feel safe, secure, confident and have opportunities for enjoyment.

A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 3

Early educators recognise the importance of play activities in giving children opportunities to look at things in new and thoughtful ways. All pre-school settings provide a wide range of learning opportunities for children to learn through play and exploration.

On a regular basis, parents see their children enjoying active play throughout their pre-school experience. But what perceptions do parents have of the role of play in their child's learning?

Beth is an only child. Playing with other children gives her the opportunity to learn to share.

I often see that, at home with their pals, they use their imagination to make up games to play together.

Although Gavin loves to play on his own with the train set, I've noticed the cat gets to be a special friend.

Parents recognise the value of play in enhancing their child's social skills and in encouraging cooperative play but they can be less sure about the role and status of play in the wider process of learning.

Play means they don't have to do things they don't want to.

When they are playing I suppose they pick up things as they go along.

I know they are learning something when they play together with friends, but I don't think the children realise they are.

I know they learn things as they play but it's difficult to tell exactly what.

Play is often seen as something children do while they are busy doing something else.

Kenneth often plays by himself. He loves playing with whatever is around when I am working in the kitchen.

When they go off to play with their friends it's great, because I can get on in the house.

When friends come round, the children go off and play and – for a short while – give us space to have a chat and a coffee.

As they come in and out of pre-school centres, it is easy for parents to focus on the games and material resources that we provide for their children. When talking about their children's play, parents frequently refer to the toys, games and activities that their children enjoy and often ask for guidance about what educational toys they can buy for their children.

> *While many young children are capable of playing together for extended periods of time they may still need adult guidance and support. They may need encouragement and help from adults in order to learn how to interact with other children.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 4

The role of adults is central in supporting and extending children's learning through play.

Early educators have a very important role to play in emphasising that *parents themselves* are as important as the toys and games they buy for their children. We need to highlight for parents the importance of adult–child interactions in deepening and enhancing play as a learning activity.

However, it seems that we are not always effective in our communication with parents about their role in supporting this.

When they're babies, the health visitor gives you advice about what they can do, but when they get to three or four years old there's nobody to let you know what they should be able to do at different stages.

The staff are really good at telling me how Jamil is doing in the centre. I know that it is important that I help him at home but I'm not sure what to do for the best.

I get to the stage that even if the box has her age on it I think, 'Oh. I don't know if she's ready for that.'

If you were talking about sport or music you would want them to move on. If my son hit the ball 20 yards with the cricket bat then I would say to him, 'Try and hit it a bit further. … but when it is about reading or writing you don't know what the next step might be.

I often go to the bookshop and buy one of these 'Help your child' activity books.

Parents need reassurance about how what they are already doing with their child is important in supporting his/her learning. They need and want explicit information.

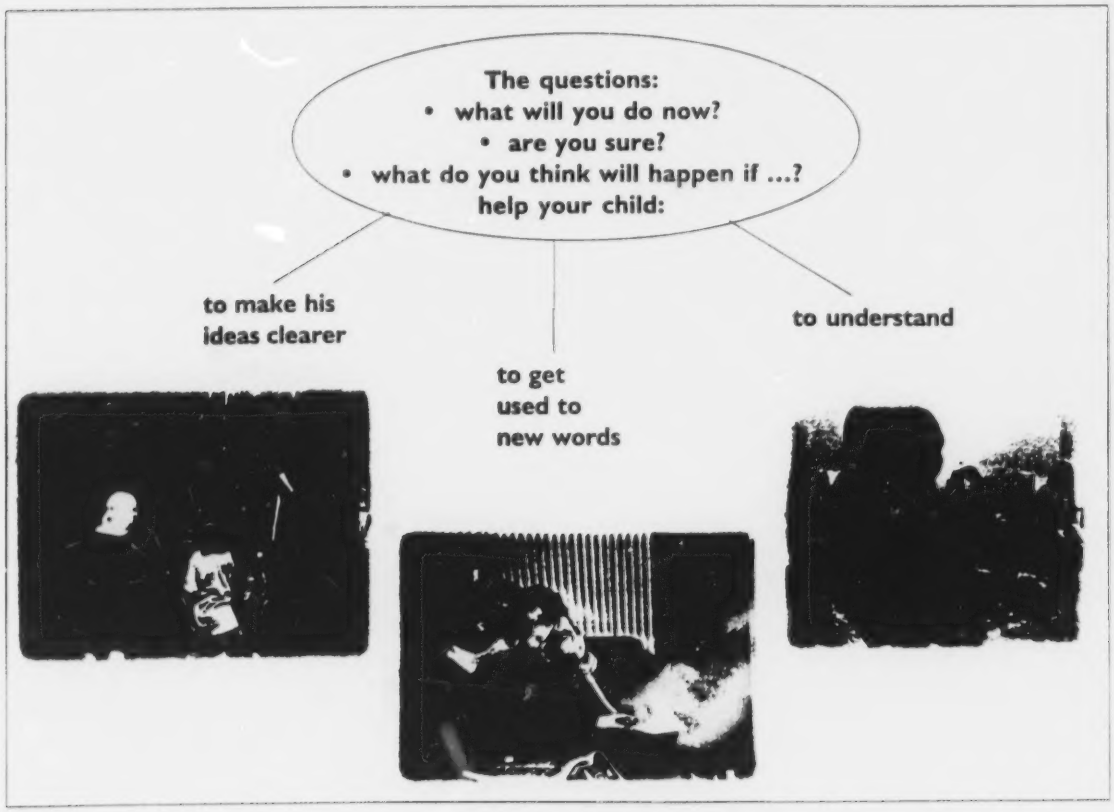
When L. got his new remote control car, his dad played around with it with him and together they worked out how to get it to go properly.

Example from practice

In our nursery we try to link the guidance we offer to family experiences that already exist.

Taking time to watch, listen and talk to your children:
- gives them confidence to try new things
- encourages their concentration.

Encouraging your children to explain what they are doing as they play helps them.


The questions:
• what will you do now?
• are you sure?
• what do you think will happen if ...?
help your child:
to make his ideas clearer
to get used to new words
to understand

Sharing in your children's achievements

That's a great deal! (This gives children confidence in what they can do.)

I never thought of that ... (This encourages them to use what they can do in unfamiliar situations.)

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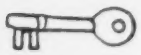


Early educators have an important role to play in encouraging parents to develop a conscious reflection of their family practices and the interactions they have with their children.

Consider the initiatives described below. These were developed to highlight the important role of adults in drawing children into meaningful use of resources and to give parents guidance on effective interactions to support children's learning and development. Everyone involved in these initiatives agreed that they were great fun and very successful. Can you identify some of the key elements in the planning and execution that helped ensure their success?

Example 1

The playgroup gave us a 'sequence' of photographs to take home as a game to play with our child. When you looked closely there was one of the photographs missing. Little cards with questions encouraged us to guess: 'What do you think the missing photograph was?'

I always love to see photographs of my children!

It was a really good game to play. It was actually a really good laugh too. We enjoyed it in our house so much that we made our own game using our own family photos.

Example 2

We've just had our story sack launch in the nursery. It was a great morning. All the staff, children and parents dressed up as storybook characters and we had a teddy bears' picnic.

We had quite a discussion about what we should put in them.

We had an Open Day in our nursery to celebrate the launch of our number sacks. We made out the invitations and we had to explain all about them to a variety of visitors.

I really enjoyed going to buy the material. We really had to hunt to find patterns that matched the stories.

I think they're great – ... much cheaper than going out to buy toys and games.

Sewing up the sacks reminded me of being back at school, struggling with 'tacking' and keeping the stitches in a straight line.

We have fun looking around the house for the bits and pieces needed for the activity.

Helping the staff to write wee information booklets for parents to put inside the sacks made me think.

I went to a meeting about the story sacks in the nursery.

The staff always want to know what we thought about the story and the activity.

If I let Joseph choose the sack he is more likely to follow the instructions properly.

Shared home tasks

> *To promote effective learning in an atmosphere of mutual trust and respect adults need to be consistent and realistic in their expectations and their responses to children.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 44

Developing 'shared activities', which make use of the home and neighbourhood as educational environments and relate to children's everyday experiences, can be effective in encouraging and enhancing parent–child discussion and interaction and in the confidence of parents in both their own and their child's abilities.

Shared home tasks can:

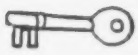
- help parents to see how ordinary, everyday activities can help support learning
- enhance parents' confidence in their abilities
- reinforce the importance of adult–child interactions as they share activities *with* their child
- guide parents towards new ideas.

But consider how developing shared home activities can also enhance our role as early educators.

- Our understanding about the range of ordinary, everyday activities in the home that parents and child share is enriched.
- Feedback from parents can guide us in our planning and development of new challenges.

The practical challenge is to:
explore ways of encouraging and enhancing parent–child discussion and interaction to increase the confidence of parents in their abilities.

SEE ACTIVITY 10



If we are to enhance parental confidence then it is important to encourage existing strengths and to develop these, rather than replace them with new ones.

WORKING TOGETHER: ESTABLISHING A FRAMEWORK FOR SHARING CHILDREN'S ACHIEVEMENTS

> *Children's previous experiences and achievements, their needs and interests, and the individual ways in which they learn are important in their progress in each of the key aspects.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 44

In our staff teams we carefully observe and record the progress of individual children. Many parents are aware that we make daily detailed observations of children's learning. They are often fascinated at just how closely their children are being observed as they play.

> *We've seen notes on the wall. When a member of staff picks up that a child has done something, they write it down.*

Parents want to know more.

> *I've noticed wee stickers with children's names on them. When I caught sight of one with my child's name on it I was curious to know what it said.*

Early educators regularly share profiles of individual children based on careful observations of children's progress in learning and development with progress.

In planning for children's learning adults should consider both the needs and achievements of the child and the range of learning experiences that will help children to progress in different aspects of their learning and development.

A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 44

The way in which we share information about children's achievement with parents will influence their understanding about progression in learning and influence the perceptions they have of the role they play in supporting this.

We regularly offer opportunities for parents to contribute to the picture we are building up of individual children by engaging them in informal discussions.

Informal sharing of children's achievements and interests throughout their pre-school experience is important.

Children's confidence, knowledge and interactions vary according to the social context they are in. Parents have a very special relationship with their child that gives them lots of opportunities to see what their child can do in a variety of contexts.

I keep all of her pictures and put them in an art folder. It's amazing to see how much they have developed.

I've noticed that Laura now recognises new numbers. She's learned them at playgroup and points them out everywhere we go.

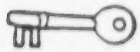
Once we read a story at bedtime. Galab said that it was his favourite story at nursery, so we've now got a 'favourites bookshelf'.

I keep carrier bags of all my children's work. Even although the older ones are now at school we still look through them to see how they've come on.

Consider the potential of encouraging parents to contribute to our formal documentation.

- Encouraging parents to contribute to our formal observations and records can make links between the child's learning in the nursery and the parents' observations and experience of their child in the home and family context more explicit.
- It encourages parents to re-examine their expectations of what their child can do.

When early educators listen to parents' comments and perceptions of the child they too are encouraged to re-examine their expectations of what the child can do.



We need to give parents the opportunity to add their comments and views to our more formal observations so that we obtain a more holistic view of what the child can do.

Example from practice

4/9 Richard learned how to use scissors today and has made excellent attempts at cutting.

I've never seen him with scissors. I always thought he was too young to have scissors.

17/11 Kay counting shapes '9, 12, 13' and then later '1, 2, 3, 4'

I've watched her at home counting and she knows the numbers but often gets mixed up.

12/10 Anne making a playdough spider. 'Do you know where a spider's mouth is? It's under it's throat.'

She found a spider climbing up the bathtub last week and kept on asking me lots of questions. I hate spiders and couldn't tell her anything about them, but I did sing her the song I remembered from her brother's nursery days. What's it called – 'Incy Wincy Spider'?

30/11 Harry completed the *Thomas the Tank Engine* alphabet tray without adult help.

He got that same jigsaw for his birthday last month and his cousin has been helping him do it at home.

12/11 Joe showing the scarf he has on. 'It's lots of different colours and my mum puts fabric conditioner in it to make it smell nice.'

Good grief! I didn't realise that he watched me so closely when I'm doing the washing!

16/11 Ben used pincers to pull a nail out of wood – very competent use of tools – says he uses them at home.

Ben has his own tool kit. It's not a toy one. I put together a box of some of mine and we do a lot of wee jobs together. He's a canny wee lad and is quite carfeul with the tools. His favourite is a little hacksaw.

Reporting is a means of promoting partnership with parents and of sharing information with children ... and determining the next steps in learning.

A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 49

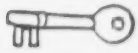
When parents and early educators contribute their comments, views and knowledge to observations and assessment of children's learning it:

- helps to ensure all of the child's interests and strengths are taken into account
- enables parents to become more aware of their children's experiences and the ways in which learning develops
- encourages parents to share with us the knowledge and experiences gained by their children in contexts beyond our pre-school centre
- develops our understanding and awareness of children's experiences beyond the nursery/centre
- highlights the crucial role of adults.

When both parents and early educators take time to step back and reflect on how and what the child has learned, they are more likely to identify the different, yet complementary roles they play in promoting more effective learning.

The practical challenge is:
to involve parents in our observation, planning and assessment of children's learning in ways that realise the full potential of the significant contributions and comments that parents have to offer.

SEE ACTIVITY 11



When educators and parents record children's achievements together, they promote a sense of community in which both gain a deeper understanding and knowledge of child development and learning.

SECTION SIX: AND SO TO SCHOOL

> *The vital contribution of pre-school education lies in developing and broadening the range of children's learning experiences, to leave them confident, eager and enthusiastic learners who are looking forward to school.*
>
> *A Curriculum Framework for Children 3 to 5*, Scottish CCC, 1999, p. 56

The transition into school is widely recognised as an important episode in the life of a young child. Studies of transition consistently highlight that the process of 'becoming a pupil' can exert a variety of stressful demands on children. But consider the following.

For an increasing number of young children, the transition into school is not necessarily their first step outside the home. In the first five years of their lives, many will have experience of being cared for beyond the family home. Many will have encountered a number of transitions, moving from environments in which they have developed a sense of confidence and belonging into new physical settings in which they face new challenges and relationships and unfamiliar routines. As early educators, we have worked together with parents throughout the pre-school years to support our children through these changes in environments, experiences and relationships.

Can the transition from pre-school to school then still be viewed as 'a landmark in the process of growing up?' It seems so. From a very early age, children are aware that the journey into school takes them into a world of new expectations and attitudes.

It's a big step from playing to learning.

- *You can only choose when you've finished your work and got it all right.*
- *We need to go to school to learn and to work hard.*
- *You need to learn to read and write.*

It's a big step into a place of routines and rules.

- *You have to sit and listen to the teacher.*
- *You get a row if you talk.*
- *You have to eat your lunch.*

'On the nursery steps but a schoolgirl now'

It brings changes loaded with uncertainty.

- *What if I start to cry when mummy goes away?*
- *What if nobody plays with me at playtime?*
- *What if I can't do my work?*

In our pre-school centres we carefully plan to ensure continuity and progression in their developing and learning by:

- sharing profiles of children's learning with each other and with primary staff
- arranging for children to meet and spend time with their new teacher
- making practical arrangements to help familiarise children with their new school.

Going to school is a big step for children and as a result when we think about how best to support children's learning during the transition from pre-school to school we focus primarily on the child.

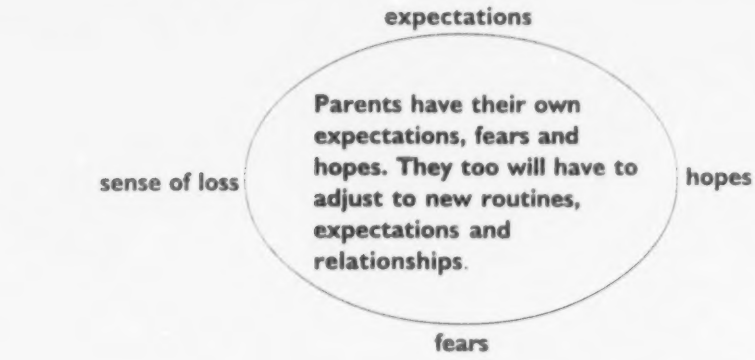
Parents too have been carefully considering how they can support their child as they move into school.

Her big brother sits with her and reads books about starting school.

I go to the parent–child book club for primary 1 parents. Joe's big brother is in P1, but I took Joe along with me just so he could get a sense that I'll still be a part of his life at school.

It's all about giving them more space to try new things and to gain confidence.

The child's move into school will be significantly affected by parents and family. Parents will be the key link as the child moves into school but parents are well aware that school will differ from their experience.


expectations
Parents have their own expectations, fears and hopes. They too will have to adjust to new routines, expectations and relationships.
sense of loss
hopes
fears

I don't expect there will be as much time to talk to the teacher in school.

Well, we won't have the evenings to do things together. They'll be taken care of with homework! I hope we will be told what they should be able to do before they go to school.

I'll miss the regular tea and chats I had with other parents.

I don't suppose I'll be able to get involved in the school unless I join the PTA or school board and that's too formal for me.

You really lose your child when they go to school. I saw it with his big sister: 'That's not the way the teacher tells us to do it.' It'll be what the teacher says that goes!

School will be more stimulating and challenging for him.

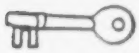
The school gate is a long way from the school door. I'll be waving goodbye to a wee speck on the horizon.

As the day gets nearer I'm really quite anxious about the move to school myself and I don't want to put her off.

I'll not be able to help much. The way they teach is different from when I was at school. Daniel really loves running about outside at nursery. I worry that he'll not be able to sit and concentrate.

Throughout all stages of the education process, parents, children and educators will each have their own fears, hopes, expectations and aspirations. Some of these will be shared, some conflicting. Have we uncovered sources of discontinuity and identified potentially conflicting aims and expectations?

SEE ACTIVITY 12



If children are to realise their full potential, then supporting children's learning needs to be a joint responsibility for both educators and parents not only in the pre-school years but throughout a child's school life.

'Andrew is in Primary 5 now. He loves school and we both enjoy spending time in the evenings making models. It's a good way to find out what he has been doing at school too!'

How confident are you that in the centre you have realised the full potential of both your role and that of parents so that:

- children go off to school 'eager, willing and able to learn'
- parents feel supported in understanding how their role can be continued and enhanced throughout their child's schooling.

SECTION SEVEN: ACTIVITIES

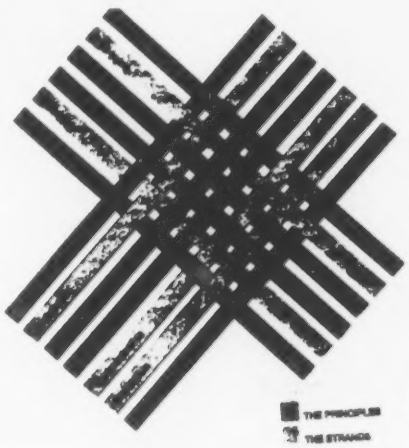
A ACTIVITY 1

> *No programme of teaching can be successful if we do not take into account the characteristics of young children and how they learn.*
> David, T., *Young Children Learning*, Paul Chapman Publishing Company, 1999

Supporting young children's learning involves more than nurturing their developing skills and knowledge. Feelings and relationships play a part in children being ready, willing and able to learn.

The practical challenge is:

- to help parents understand the important connections between encouraging positive emotional, personal and social development in young children and the development of all aspects of learning
- to listen to parents to find out more about what they have already being doing with their children to develop confidence and self-esteem.



The diagram shown here is based on the New Zealand concept of 'Te Whariki' or 'woven mat'. The concept of a woven mat is used to integrate the principles, strand and goals that form the framework of the New Zealand curriculum.

As a pre-school centre staff team create a visual image to help parents develop a deeper awareness of the five key aspects of learning in our curriculum framework, and the central importance of emotional, personal and social development and play to this network of learning. This could be included in your centre booklet.

Parents need to know that the learning experiences they share with their child in the wider world of family and friends are an integral part of the curriculum.

- Consider the potential of this exercise as a workshop activity for parents.
- Identify existing strategies you have developed that you have found successful in meeting both parts of the practical challenge outlined above.

School staff

- How do you ensure continuity between the curriculum children in your class experience in their pre-school year and the 5–14 programme you present to them during their first few weeks in school?
- In what ways do you help parents develop a deeper awareness of the close links there are between the curriculum that children aged 3–5 experience in their pre-school years and your teaching programme in Primary 1?

ACTIVITY 2

Home visits

> *Home visiting can be seen as the way to push this parental involvement along the road towards a partnership. Parents on their own ground, often supported by other family members, may feel more confident to contribute their own ideas or raise criticisms.*
>
> Jackson, A. and Hannon, P., *The Belfield Reading Project Final Report*,. National Children's Bureau, 1987

Both staff and parents have information about the child to give and share with each other. Home visits are one way of offering parents an opportunity to share their knowledge of their child with us.

The practical challenge is to explore how to begin opening up channels of two-way communication about children's early learning.

As a pre-school centre staff team, what do you see to be the benefits/limitations of developing home visits in your particular pre-school setting from:

- the perspective of the staff team?
- a parent's perspective?

If you offer home visits how do you make sure that parents who choose not to have a visit at home get access to the information that is shared during a home visit?

In the absence of home visits what practical arrangements have you developed to help and support families so that they look forward with confidence to their pre-school experience?

School staff

What do you see to be the benefits/limitations of offering home visits for children new to your class/school from:

- the perspective of teachers?
- a parent's perspective?

Can you think of any occasion when a home visit has been made to a family in your school? Why was this considered useful?

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ACTIVITY 3

Many parents are eager for reassurance that in their ordinary, daily interactions they are helping to foster their children's development. It should be one responsibility of the professional to provide such reassurances.

Henry, M., The dimensions of parental behaviour: some implications for professionals, *Australian Journal of Early Childhood*, 1988, 13(2), pp. 3–12

The practical challenge is to:

- help parents identify the skills and routines that they have fostered through everyday routines in and around the home
- show them how these link to children's learning and achievement during their first days in your nursery/centre.

As a pre-school staff team create a chart that highlights particular routines you have in your nursery to create links between these and opportunities for children's learning. Consider how you can develop this further to highlight links between potential learning opportunities offered by centre routines and learning opportunities offered through 'normal, everyday' family routines.

Parents are more likely to be involved when they can see that what they are doing helps their child. Consider the potential of this activity as a parents' workshop session.

School staff

Can you identify any occasions when drawing parents' attention to the normal, everyday interactions that they share with their children has been an effective way of helping parents make a direct connection between learning in school and at home? How did you do this?

ACTIVITY 4

Written communication provides an important opportunity to reappraise what a school has to offer and to relate this in appropriate ways to the lives and experiences of the parents and the wider community.

Bastiani, J., *Working with Parents: A Whole School Approach*, NFER-Nelson, 1989

The practical challenge is to re-evaluate the nature of the written communication we make with parents and the kind of information we share with them.

As a pre-school staff team carefully consider your existing centre booklet.

- Are parents encouraged to communicate their needs and interests with you or is the flow of information essentially one-way?
- How do you ensure that the information shared shows sensitivity to the physical and cultural diversity of family life?
- In what ways are connections made between the information you provide about your centre and parents' skills and opportunities for learning in the home?
- What modifications could be made to your existing booklet to ensure a balance between providing information that helps parents to understand what you are doing in the pre-school setting and providing information to make clear connections with home experiences?

School staff

The nature and extent of communication and contact you have with parents in the early days of school influences parents' perceptions of their role in supporting children's learning. How, in the first few weeks of a child starting school, do you share with parents your expectations of the role they will play in supporting their child's learning?

Many parents will have taken up opportunities for supporting their child's learning offered to them in their child's pre-school year. Many will expect and want to continue this involvement when their child starts school. How do you share with parents the opportunities that the school has to offer for parents to continue to be involved?

ACTIVITY 5

> *Children from every area will come to school with a wide variety of learning experiences from their family and community, not simply in terms of what they have learned but also how they have learned as they interacted with others. Just as important, they will also bring with them their models of what is worth learning and therefore what, for them, constitutes achievement.*
>
> Watt, J., Educational Disadvantage in a Culture of Achievement, Research Priorities for the Early Years, *Scottish Educational Review*, 1996, 28, pp. 139–148

The practical challenge is to support and strengthen the role of parents by valuing what they are doing to support their young child's learning.

As a pre-school staff team list ways in which you currently encourage parents to tell you about the achievements, interests or experiences that they have shared with their child before coming to nursery.

What have been the benefits and limitations of the current approaches both from your own perspective and from feedback from parents?

How might you alter/develop these existing strategies to make them more effective?

School staff

It can be so easy to underestimate the rich, informal knowledge and experiences that children continue to gain in and around the home.

How do you currently encourage parents to tell you about the achievements, interests or experiences that they have shared or continue to share with their child when they start school?

What have been the benefits and limitations of current approaches both from your own perspective and from feedback from parents?

How might you alter or develop these existing strategies to make them more effective?

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ACTIVITY 6

Until parents have confidence in their own efforts then they will not see any contribution they can make as having any significance.

Merttens and Vass, *Partnership in Maths: Parents and Schools Project*, Falmer Press, 1996

The practical challenge is to develop a range of written communications that are sensitive to and address families' changing needs, interests and concerns.

As a pre-school staff team:

- consider how valuable you think a series of 'booklets' or 'pamphlets' could be in providing ongoing information to meet the changing needs, interests and concerns of parents and families in your particular setting
- what feedback have parents given you about the value and effectiveness of your written communications? How did you encourage this feedback?
- reflect on questions that parents have raised in the past. What themes do these suggest might be developed through 'booklets' or 'pamphlets' to match parents' needs/interests.

School staff

What written communication have you developed to meet the changing needs/interests/concerns of parents and families during the early days at school?

Have parents given you any feedback about the value/effectiveness of these? How did you encourage this feedback?

Reflect on questions your parents have raised in the past when their child has first started school. Have there been any common concerns/interests/themes that have arisen?

ACTIVITY 7

> *The essence of good communication is a two-way process in which each participant can seek and give information and each attends to what the other is saying.*
> Bastiani, J., Goode, J. and Atkin, J., *Listening to Parents*, Croom Helm, 1988

The practical challenge is to strike a balance in the interactions and contact we have with our parents between:

- the information parents want from us
- the information we want to give parents
- the information we want from parents.

As a pre-school staff team consider the following questions.

What different strategies have you developed to encourage interaction, communication and contact between staff and parents, and between parents?

Are these strategies used predominantly to tell parents about their child's centre-based learning experiences? If so, what other strategies have you developed to ensure opportunities for parent–parent and staff–parent discussion of learning opportunities in both home and pre-school environments?

What have been the successes and limitations of these:

- from your perspective?
- according to feedback from your parents?

In what ways do you encourage parental input in the organisation and planning of Open Days and meetings with parents?

School staff

What different strategies have you developed to encourage interaction, communication and contact between staff and parents, and between parents when a child first starts school?

What have been the successes and limitations of these:

- from your perspective?
- according to feedback from parents?

In what ways do you encourage parental input in the organisation and planning of Open Days and meetings for parents?

ACTIVITY 8

> *Young children should learn from everything that happens to them and around them. They do not separate their learning into different subjects or disciplines.*
> Ball, C., *Start Right: The Importance of Early Learning*, London RSA, 1994

The practical challenge is to consider how we could use displays to encourage deeper and more meaningful discussion with parents about early development and learning.

As a pre-school staff team:

- discuss the display examples given on p. 39 of the text. These were designed to share with parents some of the different opportunities for learning provided for children as they explore the potential of new materials in different ways
- what displays have you created that have been effective in sharing with parents what their children have learned and achieved on each step of the way to creating the finished product?

What have been the successes and limitations of these displays in encouraging deeper and more meaningful discussion with parents about early development and learning:

- from your perspective?
- according to feedback given from parents?

School staff

Time for regular daily face-to-face contact with parents is limited in school.

What strategies have you developed to encourage meaningful exchanges with parents about their children's home and school experiences?

What have been the successes and limitations of these:

- from your perspective?
- according to feedback given by parents?

ACTIVITY 9

> *Most education happens outside the school. Much of it, especially in the early years, is experienced in the family where emotional bonds make home learning especially effective.*
>
> Macbeth, A., *Involving Parents*, Heinemann Educational, 1989

The opportunities we offer for parents to become more actively involved give parents a strong message about the role that they play in their child's learning.

The practical challenge is to develop a network of strategies that encourage active parental involvement in a variety of contexts.

As a pre-school staff team:

- consider what opportunities you offer at present for parents to be more actively involved in supporting their children's learning
- use the model below to chart your existing approaches to working with parents. Are they evenly distributed between the cells?

		Location of work with parents	
		In nursery or centre	**At home**
Focus of work with parents	**At home learning**		
	In nursery/ centre learning		

Adapted from Weinberger, J., Mannon, P. and Nutbrown, C., *Ways of Working with Parents to Promote Early Literacy Development*, University of Sheffield, 1990

If the distribution is not even, consider the potential of this model in helping staff in your setting to develop a network of strategies that offers opportunities for parental involvement across a variety of contexts.

Parents' perceptions about the value/limitations of opportunities for parental involvement offered within your centre should form the basis of the future planning of activities. How do you encourage parents to share these with you?

Consider the potential of using this framework as a parents' workshop to encourage parents to think about where and how they are already supporting their child's learning.

School staff

What opportunities do you offer parents at present to be more actively involved in their children's learning when they first start school?

Use the University of Sheffield model to chart these opportunities. Are they evenly distributed between the cells?

If not, consider the potential of this model in helping to develop a network of strategies that offers opportunities for parental involvement in both 'in-school' and 'out-of-school' contexts.

ACTIVITY 10

> *Parents' home involvement with their children's learning can have important effects on children's achievement and allows many working parents and non-English speaking parents to become involved in their child's education.*
> Watkins, T.J., Teacher Communications, 'Child Achievement and Parents' Traits in Parental Involvement Models', *Educational Research*, 1997, 91(1)

The practical challenge is to explore ways of encouraging and enhancing parent–child discussion and interaction and to increase the confidence of parents in their abilities.

As a pre-school staff team consider:

- what shared home activities you have developed that have been effective in meeting this challenge
- whether you can identify some of the key elements in the planning and execution that helped ensure the success of these
  - from your perspective
  - from feedback parents have given.

How did you make sure that you provided appropriate support for different families and that you took account of the cultural diversity of families within your setting?

School staff

Homework is regularly sent home from school. How do you encourage parents to give you feedback about their 'homework experiences?'

Consider any homework you have set that you feel has been effective in encouraging parental involvement. Can you identify key reasons why this was successful?

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ACTIVITY 11

> *If we are to help young children to learn in the full meaning of the word, they must be aware not only of what children know and what they can do but also how they learn, how they react to success and failure and what their culture of learning and achievement has, to date, been about.*
>
> Watt, J., 'Educational Disadvantage in a Culture of Achievement: Research Priorities for the Early Years', *Scottish Educational Review*, 1996, 28, pp. 139–148

The practical challenge is to involve parents in our observation, planning and assessment of children' learning in ways that realise the full potential of the significant contributions and comments that parents have to offer.

The Scottish CCC publication, *Promoting Learning: Assessing Children's Progress 3 to 5*, gives clear guidance on how to involve parents in all aspects of the planning cycle.

As a pre-school staff team:

- in what ways have you helped parents to recognise what their child *can do* and to encourage parents to contribute their experience and observations of aspects of their child's learning?
- what developments have you made to incorporate the information that parents have about the way in which their child learns at home in your formal documentation?

Encouraging parents to be actively involved in our planning cycle presents a challenge to early educators in terms of organising, clarifying and debating their understanding of how children learn with others. How do you ensure that everyone in your team feels confident in meeting this challenge?

School staff

Consider the ways in which you share children's progress and achievement with parents. To what extent do you include parents' observations and knowledge of their children in your formal records?

ACTIVITY 12

> *Children from every area will come to school with a wide variety of learning experiences from their family and community, not simply in terms of what they have learned, but also how they have learned as they have interacted with others. Just as important, they will also bring with them their models of what is worth learning and therefore what, for them, constitutes achievement.*
>
> Watt, J., 'Educational Disadvantage in a Culture of Achievement: Research Priorities for the Early Years', *Scottish Educational Review*, 1996, 28, pp. 139–148

The practical challenge is:

- to ensure that children are confident, eager and enthusiastic learners who are looking forward to starting school
- to enhance parental confidence in their role as the key link in the transition between pre-school and school.

As a pre-school staff team consider the following questions.

- What practical arrangements do you put in place in your centre to help to 'ensure a smooth and confident entry for children to primary school'?
- Parents will be the key link as their child moves on to school. How do you encourage parents to share with you their fears, hopes and expectations of the transition into school?
- What strategies do you have in place to help support parents in their role as 'key link person' for their child?

School staff

Transitional support strategies tend to focus on the child. What practical arrangements do you put in place in your centre to help to 'ensure a smooth and confident entry for parents to primary school'?

Do you encourage discussion about how the similarities and differences between the nature of the school day and a day in a pre-school centre might affect the relationship between parent and teacher?

How can you reassure parents about the very important role they will continue to play in supporting their child's learning?

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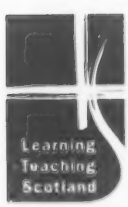

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